

An interview with Ernestine Myers Morrissey

ERNESTINE MYERS MORRISSEY

An Interview Conducted by

Joyce Shanks

March 31, 1980

&

August 16, 1980

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# NARRATOR DATA SHEET

June 7, 1980

DATE

Name of narrator: Ernestine Myers Morrissey

Address: 3329 Wabash Ave., Terre Haute, IN Phone: 232-5866

Birthdate: 1900 Birthplace: Terre Haute, Indiana

Length of residence in Terre Haute: lifetime

Education: St. Joseph's Catholic School. King Crawford Classical School. Chicago Musical College. Denishawn School of Dance.

Occupational history: Professional dancer, 7 years; teacher of dance, some 50-odd years.

Professional memberships: Dance Masters of American and Chicago National Association of Dance Masters.

Special interests, activities, etc. Handwork, special interest in underprivileged students in own classes, current events, volunteer at hospital gift shop.

Major subject(s) of interview: Narrator's experiences as a dancer of national acclaim and some memories of vaudeville and local scene when she taught dancing.

No. of tapes: 1 Length of interview: 60 minutes

Terms of legal agreement: \_\_\_\_\_

## Interviewing sessions:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Interviewer</u>
03/31/80		Mrs. Morrissey's residence	Joyce Lakey Shanks
08/16/80		" "	" " "

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ERNESTINE MYERS MORRISSEY

Tapes 1 & 2

March 21, 1980

Mrs. Morrissey's Home -- 3329 Wabash Avenue, Terre Haute, Indiana

Interviewer: Joyce Shanks

Transcribers: Joyce Shanks -- Jane Pursell

For: Vigo County Oral History Program

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JS: This is Joyce Shanks and we're sitting in the living room of Ernestine Myers Morrissey, whose name has been synonymous with dance in our community for over 50 years -- and also in the whole country. Mrs. Morrissey lives at 3329 Wabash Avenue, Terre Haute, Indiana. Ernestine, I'd like for you to tell us some of your recollections of your childhood and how you became interested in the dance.

MYERS: I lived at 1444 [1441] South Sixth Street. My father was Albert Myers, and my mother was Flora Myers. Like all children, I guess I played around with puppies more than dolls; I loved dogs. They used to call me "Little Miss Flinnegan" around the neighborhood.

Rose Farrington lived at Fifth [920 South Fifth Street] and Farrington [Street] in an old fashioned mansion, and she taught ballroom in one of the large parlors. As I remember, they were double parlors, and Julia Parker and Elizabeth Pugh and myself all took dancing lessons. [About 1910] And I do remember that she always spoke of "Chalif." [Louis H. Chalif, U. S. ballet teacher and author of numerous books on dance techniques]. "Chalif" was the [kind of] dances we were learning. Most of them were little skirt dances, or we had a balloon or a flower.

Then we would dance for charity things, such as St. Stephen's church, their guild. They always had, for a couple of years that I can remember, a garden party on the Ball estate on South Sixth Street. [William C. Ball, 1138 South Fifth Street] It was about in the 1100 block. We would dance there and for the Phoenix Club when the old Phoenix Club was at Fifth and Walnut. [203 South Fifth Street]

At that time, Anna Pavlova had been in Terre Haute with her company, and she did a Pavlova gavotte.

MYERS: I was ambitious, and Ruel "Fox" Burns and I used to do a Pavlova gavotte. From there, certain people in Terre Haute gave me a great deal of encouragement, such as Dr. Rudolph Young, who was very nice to me, and George Oscar Dix who was an attorney. They told mother that I should go to Chicago and study.

My mother took me to the Chicago Musical College, which was owned by W. K. Ziegfeld /brother of Florenz/. The teacher there was from the Royal Opera in Budapest, and she was brought to this country by Andrew Dipple. While a student there, I used to dance for the Indiana Society which was held at the Congress Hotel in the Gold Room.

Wilbur Nesbit and John T. McCutcheon were great admirers of mine. They'd give me candy and flowers and encouraged me. I danced at the John T. Borden home, and I remember that I had never seen such luxury. So I kept dancing; regardless of whether the music stopped, I was still going. But I never did that again. So that was about all until I went to California.

JS: How old were you at this time?

MYERS: I would presume -- when I was really dancing for the Indiana Society -- maybe 12, 13; because when I went to California, I was 16.

JS: And these names that you mention, Mr. Nesbit and Mr. Borden. Who is Mr. Nesbit?

MYERS: That I asked Tony Hulman, and I'm sorry to say I have forgotten. They were both very important. One was a newspaperman, and one was a composer and wrote one of the very important musical shows. I'm sorry to say I can't remember which one /of them/ wrote.

JS: And Mr. Borden was with . . .

MYERS: John T. Borden Milk Company

JS: Were you living in Chicago?

MYERS: No, no, I would just go back and forth. I would take the early morning train to Chicago and be there by nine o'clock. I'd take a lesson in the morning and the afternoon and come home in the evening and be home. I did that every week. After I became friendly with several of the girls up there, I'd go up there and be their guest at their home and stay for about ten days.

JS: That was really a very different kind of life for a young girl . . .

MYERS: Well, in those days, girls of my age were not taught to work. In fact, my friends looked down on me because I was not going to a finishing school. And I might say when I was on the stage and meeting people socially, all these young people my age would say "Where'd you go to school?" And I'd say "To Martin Beck's private school." Private schools were the thing then, but Martin Beck controlled the Orpheum circuit, and they didn't know that. And the Orpheum circuit was Keith Orpheum! (Laughter)

JS: So it sounded like a private school.

MYERS: It sounded good. That's what I was doing. But I have never regretted not finishing an education because when you're in theater in those days, the theater was very selective. There was a great deal of class discrimination, even in the type of theater you were in, which now we don't have. It's better. I went to King Crawford Classical School. 903 South 6th Street

JS: Oh, you did?

MYERS: Yes.

JS: And that would be like grade what? . . .

MYERS: I can't even tell you grades.

JS: Elementary?

MYERS: That was about the first year [of] high school and [the] second year. And Miss Crawford was in California when I was there and tutored me; so my education wasn't neglected.

JS: Well, neglected in the sense that you just took off on a different . . . .

MYERS: Line. That's right.

JS: Do you remember anything that was going on locally while you were growing up? Any strikes or . . .

MYERS: Strikes? No. I was in Chicago one time on vacation, but this was after I'd opened my school. Mother and I were at the Drake [Hotel] and we couldn't come home because Fifth Street was struck and [blocked] and we were under martial law. We didn't come home; we just stayed [in Chicago.]

I was in an actors' strike. I was playing the Winter Garden [New York] and Mr. Law [H. Robert Law, Manager of Miss Myers] said, "I don't want you to side in with either one;" so he sent me over to Brooklyn. I was young, and he brought me a police puppy; so I had something to play with. From there on, I always had police dogs, for years, till I changed to dalmatians.

So many people say to me, "Don't you remember so and so?" Well, from 16 years old till about 22 or 23, I lost all contact with Terre Haute. My parents had moved, and my friends really. My parents had moved to Marshall [Illinois] and my father built the home over in Marshall.

JS: Shadowlawn?

MYERS: Shadowlawn. Yes. That was taken from Shadowland magazine because my picture was in there very often. When you were traveling, you would always wait to go to Kansas City to have your picture taken, because [located] there was Strauss-Payton and Hixon-Conley, the finest photographers in the country. And the picture that was shown at Kennedy Center -- am I getting this mixed up now? -- was

MYERS: from Hixon-Conley, and it is in the Art Institute in Kansas. Ernestine Myers' picture was displayed at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts at Washington, D. C., during the Bicentennial year. It had to be returned there, and we were not permitted to take any pictures of it at Kennedy Center. I asked the lady if I could take pictures, and she said, "No, it is absolutely forbidden." That was for the 1976 Centennial, the tribute to American theater.

JS: You didn't mention anything about your father's bar. Do you have any recollections of that?

MYERS: Yes, I do. Mother would drive the horse and buggy down to Fifth and Wabash, and I would go in the back door and walk past the bar up to my father's office. Sometimes the bartender would give me a little snack if they had served sandwiches and then my father would go home with us in the evening for dinner.

JS: And the name of the place was . . .

MYERS: Health Office 503 Wabash Avenue.

JS: The Health Office. Sounds like it was a thriving bar.

MYERS: It was. It was, but then times changed. Prohibition came in, and my father retired and went to the country. He built a beautiful home there, but the home was too large for the farm. The farm wasn't large enough to support the home, and depression came. From there on, I took over.

JS: So by the time you returned to Terre Haute, your family was living back in Terre Haute?

MYERS: Oh, no. No, my family moved while I was gone. As I said, the first that I had seen the home was when I was with William Rock's "Silks and Satins." That was a revue, the type of Ziegfeld Follies and Earl Carroll's Vanities and things like that. Any

Tape 1

MYERS: other questions?

JS: I'm trying to get the sequence straight.

MYERS: Now, I do want to say something. How I opened the school -- the Shuberts in New York. Do you know anything about the Shuberts?

JS: Not much.

MYERS: Well, it was J. J. Lee, and three of them . . . Sam, Sam was killed. J. J. was very nice to me, and I was in two of their musical shows -- "Follow The Girl" with Walter Catlett and "Miss Simplicity" with Raymond Hitchcock. And then the Shuberts took over vaudeville. I was on the opening bill at the 44th Street Theatre, when they first opened in vaudeville, and that was really a thrill. That was really a thrill. I'd always talked to them about opening a dancing school in New York. I was home one summer, just on vacation, and I was restless. So I walked into The Spectator office, and I said I would like to open a dancing school and I want to take out an ad. We took out the ad, and we got down to the bottom of the ad and he [the clerk] said, "What's your address?" I said, "I don't have any." And he said, "you can't open a business if you don't have a place." And he said, "right over here, over Valentine's Drug Store [801 Wabash Avenue] is a room. It's on the third floor." Beecher Cromwell had it. So I got a hold of Beecher Cromwell and rented it for one or two days a week and opened a school. Well, I had tremendous business. And then I bought the old church [Central Christian Church] on [639] Mulberry Street, next to the Condit home, and I converted that into a school. I stayed there until they closed Mulberry Street. Then I went down to Fifth Street, and I was there till I retired.

JS: And what was the address at Fifth Street?

MYERS: 318 South Fifth.

JS: So this would have been when?



MYERS: Really, when they closed Mulberry Street, I can't tell you. I would presume . . . I have so many years back of me that years don't mean too much.

JS: You were roughly traveling around . . . .

MYERS: Seven years.

JS: O.K. Say you started in . . . .

MYERS: [19]16. I came home in about [19]23 or '24.

JS: '23 or '24. And so you're 80 now, so that would have been . . . .

MYERS: I left.

JS: About 1924 or so.

MYERS: Yes.

JS: O.K.

MYERS: We figure that I've been teaching 55 years.  
[as of 1979]

JS: Let's go into your traveling a little bit, these seven years. I'd like to know what it was like, dancing with [Ruth] St. Denis [the famous dancer and vaudeville star].

MYERS: Well, St. Denis was a great starting point for me. You're paid very little, but it's such an honor to be with such a woman. And may I say she was one of the greatest women I ever knew, absolutely a wonderful woman.

JS: What made her that way?

MYERS: She was a comedienne. It was one of the great producers, and I have forgotten his name -- it wasn't Belasco because Belasco was still alive. Froman it could have been. Anyway, he sent her to India to study because she liked that type of dancing, and he brought her back to this country and

MYERS: and called her St. Denis. But he went down on the "Titanic" or the "Lusitania." Now, I don't know which one. [David Belasco added "St." and removed an "n" from Dennis, Ruth's last name.] And then who took over I don't know. She was a very, very religious woman. And when you say oriental dancing now, she would turn over in her grave because you just didn't do those things. She was a great Christian Scientist. At that time that I was there, their school was called Denishawn and they had their school in the Gish home, Dorothy and Lillian Gish.

JS: In New York City?

MYERS: No, No. [Los Angeles] California. I went out there one summer and that summer was the summer that she was the first dancer ever permitted in the Greek Theatre [in Berkeley]. We went up there for a very large concert. That was my first experience dancing with her, and that fall I went into concert with her.

In her school at that time was Martha Graham and Florence Andrews who took the name of Florence O'Denishawn, and, of course, Doris Humphrey. Those people were before me. We opened -- I think in Salt Lake City -- and we played concert -- one-night stands. And that is torture. And, of course, we travelled by train. I remember that we changed from one . . . . I played Terre Haute in concert with her. In fact, the Shubert's control had a lease on the Grand Theatre here at that time, and they wired, "If Ernestine Myers is with you, we'll play in Terre Haute." So I got an awful kick out of that.

JS: What fun!

MYERS: We changed from one-night concerts to vaudeville with her. We were all so tired from one-night concerts; it was Kansas City; we went to bed and we didn't care whether we

MYERS: got up or not. But when she went into vaudeville, there was no name but Ruth St. Denis. I mean it was just completely Ruth St. Denis. And we went into the Palace Theatre in New York, and that's the thing that gave me the break. I left her there.

JS: Now, could you tell me a little bit about what the revues were like. I mean, were there solo acts or was it a group act?

MYERS: With Ruth St. Denis?

JS: Yes.

MYERS: Well, there were about, I would say, 10 or 12 girls in the corps de ballet, you would say. Ada Forman was one of the soloists, and Florence O'Denishawn was one of the soloists, and so was I. I did a Spanish dance with Ted Shawn and a Catherine de Medici waltz with Ted Shawn. Miss Ruth, as we always called her, was very close to my mother. Mother traveled with me when I was with St. Denis.

JS: Oh, she did?

MYERS: Yes, she was with me when I was with St. Denis. Therefore, I had a closer contact with Miss Ruth than the rest of the girls. We had a chaperone who would go ahead and select the hotel we were to stay in. We were under very strict chaperones.

JS: Do you recall any particularly funny or poignant incidents that happened?

MYERS: Well, in Atlanta I remember, if Miss Ruth didn't like the audience -- she was a great comedienne -- she would turn the show into a . . . . She would do a comedy of the dance.

JS: Oh, sort of spontaneous.

MYERS: Yes, and I remember in Cincinnati on New Year's Eve she really let go and would clown around.

JS: What made her not like the audience?

Tape 1

MYERS: They would misunderstand her dance. Once, in Atlanta I remember someone in the gallery said he'd never seen angels with red wings or something. We were doing an Egyptian thing. As I said before, she was very religious. Her temple dance and her incense dance and her peacock were very religious things.

JS: So if she decided . . .

MYERS: If she heard a snicker or anything she would turn . . . .

JS: So she was actually making fun of the audience by . . . .

MYERS: Oh, yes.

JS: . . . . being a comedienne.

MYERS: May I say she'd thumb her nose, too, when the curtain came down. (Laughter) She was a wonderful person.

JS: Were there any stagedoor Johnnies bothering you by this time?

MYERS: Oh, no.

JS: No problem. And you felt very well received . . .

MYERS: Yes.

JS: . . . . by most of the audience? What did a person have to pay in those days to see you?

MYERS: Oh, that I can't say with Ruth St. Denis, but I can say this: In vaudeville (and a lot of people misunderstand vaudeville) Keith vaudeville was from New York to Chicago and down through all the southern places, but the Orpheum circuit was from Chicago west, all through western Canada and down through Texas and California.

JS: Were those the two big . . . .

MYERS: Oh, that's it.

JS: Keith and Orpheum.

MYERS: Yes. Yes, they had a lower class (I shouldn't say it that way) but your big acts would never play them because they were three-a-day shows, and they were half weeks. The big acts would only play full weeks and two shows a day. They would always have a very fine artist, either a musician or a comedian -- they were considered artists. They would always have an animal act, or they would have a miniature musical comedy with chorus girls and soubrettes and the ingenue, or they would have a miniature ballet like mine was. And you travelled in style. You travelled in style. My contract called for my maid to be paid. I had a colored maid and I missed her more when I came home than I missed the theatre.

In a show like Billy Rock's "Silks and Satins" where it's a huge company and you carry your orchestra and everything, you have your own railroad car, private car. You sit in that car according to your rank. But it just happened that I was a solo dancer, and I might say that Mr. Law put my whole company into the show as a miniature ballet.

I had three scenes. He even owned the only ground cloth and scenery that I had. The operatic singer was Princess Ju Kwan Tai (Mrs. Jerome Selig), and she was the most cultured woman I have ever known. We shared a drawing room (on the train) and we shared a dressing room. We never called anyone anything but Miss Tai and Miss Myers.

In vaudeville you would tell the manager or he knew when your records were sent in that you required a drawing room. You would stay in Chicago for a week and then you'd jump to Kansas City, but you'd have a sleeper jump. It was always arranged that way. You'd get off the train the next day at seven o'clock in the morning and maybe have breakfast and have your shows. But you were a week in the cities.

Tape 1

JS: Were you wined and dined as a . . . .

MYERS: In vaudeville, it was the social event of the week. Tickets in the front rows were \$2.50 and \$3.00. But people would have their seats reserved for the season, and you were a novelty and you were entertained.

But when Miss Tai was with the show, Miss Tai and I had an understanding that we'd never go out alone because we thought we might get into some trouble. And I had some beautiful experiences, beautiful.

JS: Could you expand on that?

MYERS: Yes, in Kansas City I came off the stage, and my mother happened to be there. I was with Carl Randall at the time, and I said, "Mother, the lady in the box has blue beads on her hat." Well, anyway, I was living at the Silback Hotel. After the matinee -- it was about five o'clock -- you go over and have your evening meal. And, of course, they were having their evening cocktails, and this woman sent a note over to me. She said, "I'm coming back tomorrow to see you. It's too hot for many flowers; here's a little bouquet." And I think she just had it on or something. Anyway, that woman's in the box every day and she became a friend. We just corresponded for a long time.

And another thing that might be interesting. I was playing in Ohio, and a woman called me and her name was Beck. She invited me to the country club, and I said, "I'm sorry I can't go." And then she called several times. Finally, she said, "Well, ask the theatre manager who I am." So I did. And he said, "Oh, she's lovely. Go." So this time I went. And she said, "Well, we were all sitting in the box, and my husband said, 'That's the kind of woman I'd like to meet.'" So she said, "I thought I'd meet you first." [Laughter] We were life-long friends!

JS: Check you out. Marvelous.

MYERS: And through Canada I had [the] flu; I was sick

MYERS: in Minneapolis and Jack Benny was on the bill with me. In western, from Chicago west, a vaudeville show travels most of the time together -- not necessarily -- but most of the time. And from Minneapolis, the show moved to Winnipeg, Canada. I was off for about three or four weeks. Mr. Benny had told a friend up there, he said, "Now, when Ernestine Myers comes, she's been sick so see what you can do for her." This man called up and said, "Would you like my car?" And I went to the other hotel; the big hotel is the Fort Garry. We had a terrible, terrible snow storm. I said to my colored maid, "Lillian, go call this man up; tell him I'd like to get to the theatre." He came up, and let us use his car, and took us to the theatre and entertained us royally. And from there on, the whole trip through western Canada was meeting lords and ladies. It was very exciting.

JS: Did you travel in Europe at all?

MYERS: No, no.

JS: It was all United States and Canada.

MYERS: I was in my home in Marshall, and Mr. Law, the man I worked for, called up; he was in England and wanted to know if I would come over for eight weeks. I turned to Mother and said, "Can I go?" and she said, "Sure." My mother never influenced me, never, never talked to me. And in later years, she said, "You know, Ernestine, I never really advised you." But I never got past the stage of talking to her. And I said to Mr. Law, "Will you be there?" And he said, "Yes." But he died before, so I just stayed home. And I never regretted it, because theatre changed. And I could not accept theatre the way it is. I can't accept it the way it is now.

JS: Why not?

MYERS: Indianapolis had a Keith vaudeville house; it had a small-time vaudeville house, Pantages House, which I never played in. It had a legitimate theatre.

MYERS: By that I mean heavy drama, and it had a musical show. What do they have now? If the great people have to play in your school auditoriums, which are great, but they're good for one night, and the travelling is hell. Pardon the expression, but it is. They travel in buses. Of course, buses now days are luxurious, but it's different. You could play a year in vaudeville. If you had an act, you were booked for a year. If you were liked by the manager in the city . . . . Some cities you play are not all the same. Washington was a great city for me; Kansas City was a great city for me; Philadelphia was a terrible city for me.

JS: Why?

MYERS: You don't know. You don't know. And Newark was a good city.

JS: Attitude of the audience?

MYERS: Yes. And in New York there were about five or six vaudeville houses, Keith vaudeville houses. Of course, the Palace was the queen. And I might say, with Carl Randall, I was held over there.

We were billed for one week, and we got to stay two. I played it any number of times. I played it with Carl Randall; I played it with Noon and McKay, and I played it with my own act. And a lot of people played there for nothing, just to say, oh, just to say they've played the Palace. But if you didn't like that, you could go in a musical show; there were all kinds of them. If you didn't like that, you could go in some of these revues like Al Jolson Winter Garden shows. By the way, if you were in a Shubert show -- you got me started -- they didn't have shows on a Sunday night. There was a law that you couldn't change scenes. So the Winter Garden, the Apollo, and a few of those shows would have Sunday night concerts. And they just put a cyclorama up and



Tape 1

MYERS never moved it. You could only do one dance or one song for three minutes, and you were paid \$200. That's all anybody got. But you could play three of those shows -- three theatres -- in one night, on Sunday night, and that's where I played with Fred Astaire and his sister, Kitty and Ted Donner, and, of course, Al Jolson. That was his home, and he got more than \$200. But he would sit there on the orchestra, on the footlights and sing for hours. You don't meet them, but you're in contact with many famous people. So in those days, you had many options. But now you don't.

JS: More than today . . .

MYERS: Oh, yes. It's too competitive today.

JS: I understand that you made all of your costumes. Is that right?

MYERS: When I was on stage? Well, when I opened with Walter Catlett, J. J. Shubert sent me to a Madam Haberstat because I was young. She made a purple ballet for me and a purple velvet hat with egrets on it. I didn't like it. And I had a low evening gown that I bought here at Herz's store years ago, and my maid and my mother and I stayed up all night and changed the dress. Then I had an oriental costume, and we changed that. I always did what I called an exhibition waltz with a man. You wear an evening gown. It had light lifts in. Once in awhile on ... what's the show?

JS: TV?

MYERS: Yes, you see it.

JS: Fred Astaire or something like that?

MYERS: Yes, like the Lawrence Welk dancers. They always do something like that so you look pretty in the evening gown. Believe it or not, I was the one that got the write-up on the costumes. I would not wear the purple costume. I hate purple to this day. No, my clothes were custom made.

JS:               What about your choreography?

MYERS:           I insisted on doing my own, and I rehearsed "Sinbad" with Al Jolson when I was first in New York. There were three ballets, and Koslov had been the ballet master there. One was a butterfly ballet; one was a jewel ballet; and one was the Ragland of Baghdad. Some wise person told me to ask for two salaries because I was doing the choreography. And J. J. said, "You're just young, and you're going to learn. Goodbye." And that was the end of that. However, they did use my dance, the Ragland of Baghdad, and I sat out there and cried, but I learned.

JS:               So by the time, Ernestine, you were 20 or so, you were commanding a salary of . . . ?

MYERS:           I don't like to mention salaries because salaries nowadays . . . . Let me say that my name went up in lights when I was with Carl Randall. And in show business in those days, you were very demanding. It was like going up a ladder, and in fact at one time I called the booking office and said, "Change the billboards. Change the lights." And I got a telegram back saying, "Mind your own business. We've made you, and we'll do as we please." But the billboards were changed next morning.

JS:               What were they? Why did you want them changed?

MYERS:           Oh! My contract called for headline or feature billing. Of course, if I was on the bill with Will Rogers or somebody like that, which I was, I did not get top billing. And your contract calls for first dressing room or second dressing room. But if it is a man who is the star, he will always give you the first dressing room. And may I say this to you. When Mr. Law signed a contract for Shubert vaudeville, he said to me, "You are too big now to go to the office. We will have him come to your hotel and have lunch with him, and we'll discuss it there." So I moved to the Ansonia Hotel where the King and the Queen came. And we took the corner suite, and we had him up for lunch. And we signed the contract then. I was guaranteed 22 weeks, played within 22 weeks without any layoffs, for \$1800 a week.

END OF SIDE ONE

JS: Ernestine, it sounds like you were working most of the time. What did you do for fun?

MYERS: You didn't have any! (Laughs) They used to say that talent was only worth a hundred dollars. Of course, now that would be maybe five hundred or a thousand. And your drawing power was worth anything you could ask for, and Mr. Law would call up and say, "When have you been to the Biltmore for tea?" We were supposed to be seen there. When have you been to the Claridge for lunch?

JS: So that was part of the job, really?

MYERS: That was part of the job. We were taught never to be seen out with anyone unless they being out with them were to an advantage. Our public image -- and I'm very much aware of that to this day -- is watched very closely.

JS: Did you have people hounding you for photographs, interviews?

MYERS: No, no, no, not really.

JS: O.K., Ernestine, let's go on then. I'd like to know why you returned to Terre Haute.

MYERS: Because I . . . Oh, I told you about opening the school. I just got involved in the school, and theatre had changed. Vaudeville was gradually going out, and my voice -- as you can tell from talking now -- was never trained. The Shuberts gave me vocal lessons, but I wouldn't take them.

In fact they brought me from Chicago one time for a show, and I was to play a part. Bryant Hall was the rehearsal hall. Mother and I got into New York in the evening. They told me to go over to Bryant Hall, and they handed me a script to read. I just folded it up and would not read it. Henry Blossim was the author of the show, and he came up to me and said, "Are you the girl they brought from Chicago for this show?" I said, "Yes, Sir." He said, "Read that script." I said, "I will not." He said, "You have to. What are you here for?" I said, "I am a specialty dancer."

MYERS: And he said to me, "Well, you are kind of pretty and you're truthful, but you've got to read lines." In a little while J. J. Shubert came in and mother said to me, "We better get out of here." (Laugh) I had two week's advance salary, and I had three transportations -- my maid, my mother, and myself -- first class that I was in debt for.

Walter Catlett had always told me whenever you sign a contract or ask for a job you ask for two weeks advance so you are sure of it. But they rewrote it and gave me three dances, and I didn't have to read lines but they did give me vocal lessons and told me to take those lessons. I wouldn't take them. [I would] go to one and miss the next. But anyone that even speaks as much as I did as a teacher should have their voice trained.

But I did get home.

JS: You did get home. You got tired of traveling?

MYERS: Not exactly. I made this statement before that my father was a well-to-do man in those days and had a nice home. But when things changed, such as Depression, I was asked to go back and do choreography for Lou Holtz. He was doing a new show. I wanted so badly to go because that's what I like and . . . but I had a substantial business.

By that time I had moved on Mulberry Street and bought this big building, and I had taken over the obligation of taking care of my family and the farm and everything. I kept my parents out there. So I had an obligation, and I never regretted it. I stayed here.

JS: Can you tell me what it was like during those early years in Terre Haute? What were the people like? They must have been very receptive to your school.

MYERS: Well, I was more or less a celebrity when I first came home, and they were very nice to me. I had a tremendous business. Everybody wanted to go

MYERS: on the stage. They were stage struck. And we did have a number of girls that were very successful. Julia Parker . . . . Well, that brings me to this.

When I first came home, Eunice Schraum had a school here, and Elizabeth Pugh had a school here. There was a Reed C. Marlatt, Florence Cizek, Nancy Sauer, and Archileen Chambers. But, of course ...

JS: Oh, now Archileen Chambers is Mrs. Shubert Sebree. Right?

MYERS: Yes. But I had a background of ballet back of me that they didn't have, so we created a different following. One of the nice things we had as a school was performing for the governor's convention in French Lick when Roosevelt was nominated. That was a thrill; I had the entire show. And I had breakfast with him the next morning. That was a thrill.

And we had the Athletic Club and the Columbia Club in Indianapolis on New Year's Eve for about three or four years. We had police escorts through the city. Now, you asked me when I play? (Laughs) I haven't played in about 40 years. New Year's Eve I always worked. I went to Florida one year and thought I'd play. I had a terrible time. (Laughs)

JS: You don't know how to play.

MYERS: Well, let me get some of these girls. Well, Marthann Bush, who is head of the Sparkettes, grew up with me and a finer person you never knew.

Elise Reiman, of the Reiman cement people here. She was with me until she was about fourteen. She went to California and joined Adolph Bolm's school and was with his ballet; she was the first premier of the Metropolitan. She is now and for years has been a teacher at the School of American Ballet with Balanchine.

Julia Parker was my neighbor. Her father was postmaster when I lived on South Sixth. She lived

MYERS: across the street, and Julia studied in Chicago and then went to New York. She was soloist for Earl Carroll's Vanities. That was like the follies. And she was soloist over at St. Louis Municipal Opera.

Sara Jane Halliger was a niece of Mrs. John S. Cox here, and they brought her to me. She was from Muncie and became "Miss Florida" and went in musical shows. She married two millionaires.

And Theodosia Terowski was a very poor little girl here and a very beautiful girl. She became soloist for Ted Lewis.

Mildred Patterson became soloist at Radio City Music Hall.

Ray Kirchner grew up with me. He was from Staunton. He is one of the finest people I have ever known. He was the soloist with the original "Can Can" in New York and "By the Beautiful Sea." He danced and did the choreography for Carol Lawrence for an Arthur Godfrey special.

Girls from my school . . . Maureen Ann Adams Sponhauer has a school in Fort Wayne.

Virginia Stoner Hunt has a school in Fort Lauderdale. She was in musical shows and she married a musical director; they opened a school in Fort Lauderdale for music and dancing. It was very successful, and I hear from her constantly.

Ethyl Marie Crabtree is over at Paris and is a very dedicated woman.

Archilee Correll has a school in Reno.

Sue Stoehr Goss worked for me -- grew up with me -- and has a school in Denver.

Wanda Stuart Howard was with Ringling Circus. She did some tricks that have never been done. But she books concerts in Dallas now.

MYERS: Laura May McKenzie married Petrillo, nephew of the music labor czar. He was ring master with Ringling circus. She was in the circus.

Melinda Koutsoumpas, my friend, was with American Ballet Theatre in Washington, D. C., in the office there. She is now working for Senator Pryor from Oklahoma.

Lynn Topping, daughter of Dr. Topping, is Lynn Topping Rector. She is now with the "Young and the Restless" television soap opera.

Now if I have left anybody out, I apologize to them. Olin Martin was from Terre Haute, and Moore and Megley were producers of musical shows for vaudeville. They were gorgeous shows -- maybe thirty or forty people in them. And I saw Olin Martin do one of the finest dances I have ever seen. But he started on the stage with McCormick (Frank) and Martin, Buzz McCormick's brother.

JS: Oh, his brother. Yes.

MYERS: Well, that's about all the people . . . .  
Oh, I can't forget ISU. I spoke of Marthann [Bush] Markle.

Hazel Lowenstein -- I don't know her maiden name -- was a teacher up there when they opened the Student Union Building. They opened it with "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and they used my girls.

Florence Curtis lived in this apartment. She was a teacher there, but that was before my time.

And, of course, Dr. Eleanor Forsythe St. John came to me for lessons when physical education had changed. She came in and said everything's going to be specialized. I even remember helping her with the waltz clog. The waltz clog was the time step. They had to know ballet and they had to know dance.

JS: Now, who is Eleanor St. John? I don't know her.

MYERS: Oh, she was head of Indiana State University's Physical Education Department for years. She retired just recently -- a couple of years ago. And Mrs. Treiber is the one in gymnastics and and ballroom dancing up there. She is just great. I don't know her first name.

And, of course, Willie Mae Grissom is up at Indiana State University. I don't know anything about Ms. Grissom, but you know they have to be considered as interested in promoting dancing.

JS: So when you had your school, you cooperated with ISU?

MYERS: Oh, yes.

JS: I suppose that there must have been some difficulty during the Depression. How did you manage?

MYERS: When all the banks closed, I was on South Fifth Street. At that time I had rented the building -- had an option to buy it for two years. I just put the checks in the mail, and they didn't clear the bank. I was like everybody else. You just didn't have any money, and, as I said, I had planned on going to Florida for a Christmas or New Year's vacation. I was panic stricken and I went to Wabash . . . . What's the business college?

JS: Terre Haute Business College.

MYERS: I only wish I knew who the man was. I went to him and I said, "I have enough money to last a few years, but I have no idea of anything to do but teach dance. I can't do anything. I can't type; I can't take shorthand." He was so nice to me. He said, "If you close your school or you go out and look for a job, you will show defeat. The thing to do is just be quiet and do nothing. Just be quiet."

So Mother said, "You don't have any business anyway so go to Florida." I went to Florida for the holidays and came home and got involved with the benefit



MYERS: [shows] for Bundles for Britain. I'm back in business. I didn't suffer, really, through the Depression. My farm was mortgaged for \$30,000. When I took over that mortgage, I walked down Wabash Avenue and thought I was the biggest business woman (Laughs). I was proud of myself. And when the banks closed, I got on the train myself and went to St. Louis. They carried the mortgage. I walked in the bank and offered them 50¢ on the dollar to buy it off. I wouldn't do it now. I would be scared to death. But I didn't have any fear in those days. In fact, when I bought the building on Mulberry Street, I spent thousands of dollars remodeling it.

My father never knew how much I made or lost. I went on the stage with St. Denis against his [her father's] will. He would come to New York to see me. He would come to Chicago to see me and he was very friendly with me. All he ever said when he walked in the building on Mulberry Street was, "I hope you know what you are doing." And I wanted so badly in time to sit down and talk to him and tell him, 'cause when I came on the stage I had some money. But he dropped dead before I had a chance to tell him, for which I was sorry.

JS: [He] probably thought it was no life for a woman.

MYERS: Oh, in those days going on the stage was a disgrace. Oh, no, he would come to Chicago, and he would come to New York. He was out at Brighton Beach with me. He was very friendly with me. He found it different.

JS: Were you an only child?

MYERS: No, my brother was nine years older. He was the one who had the education. He went through Culver. He went to Notre Dame. He was a pharmacist. And he had had two years of medicine when he went into the Army. But during the Depression, he was farming. He was the one who was farming and taking care of things.

JS: Well, so you were sort of idle for a couple of years? Were you?

MYERS: On the stage?

JS: No, I mean during the Depression here.

MYERS: Oh, I always considered myself just working and doing my job.

JS: But, I mean, you weren't having any students then?

MYERS: Oh, no, I had students all the time. Oh, yes, I had students all the time.

JS: You did?

MYERS: Oh, yes.

JS: So people were making a sacrifice even during the Depression?

MYERS: I never closed my school. And, really, I never wanted for anything. My business held up. I'm very loyal to dancing. It has given me good way -- a lot of luxuries of life. I never demanded a lot of luxury, but I had everything that was necessary. It has allowed me to meet family obligations and to meet nice people, and associate with nice people in my business. I'm very dedicated to it. I would never, even during the Depression when people were resorting to doing things I didn't approve of in dancing, I would never stoop to do it.

The first time they ever called me in the last few years and asked for belly dancing, I thought someone was insulting me. And I didn't hear of such a thing, and I used to tell my girls I would rather swear than use the word. No one. No way. (Laughs)

JS: What kind of a dancer are you?

MYERS: You know it is very hard for me to say that. I was ballet trained. Strict ballet trained. My teacher was Madame Jung from the Cecchetti School;

MYERS: and then when I went to California, we wore little ballets. They were made of sateen, pink sateen, and . . . Oh, dear, I can't think of the material we used to use instead of nylon net -- tarletan. And we wore tights. We had pink satin toe shoes. Oh, you wouldn't dare walk out of that room without turning. You never walked out with your back turned to her. You treated her like a queen. And they still do in these conventions -- the ballet teacher. Everybody stands up whether they are taking a lesson or not. Then I went to California.

She told me that I needed more extensive work, and they handed me -- what we called a one-piece swim suit. But they were leotards, and it was a brown wool suit. I was told not to wear any tights. I went out on that outdoor platform in the summer, and I cried and I cried and I cried. I looked at my stomach. I thought that my bust should be big enough that I couldn't see my stomach. I didn't have any tights on, and I stood in the best fifth position you have ever seen with my hands bras. Mr. Shawn /Ted Shawn of Denishawn/ looked at me and he said, "Where are you going?" And I thought, you old devil (Laughs), I'm going home (Laughs). But I learned to like it. She was very artistic, and so when I was on the stage, I always did a toe dance or a light ballet.

You mentioned pink. Sometimes we would wear a white wig, and one of the prettiest costumes I ever had was a pink -- coral pink -- chiffon velvet made with little puffed sleeves. It was like Pavlova gavotte.

There was a long train /and/ white wig. I always had someone on the stage, either a singer or a dancer, so that you had something to have expression with. To dance on the stage completely by myself, I could not do, because I was pretty dramatic and had some wild ideas.

MYERS: Always did that. Always did the dance, as I said, like an exhibition in ballroom with a man, sometimes with two men.

In Rock's show everything was blue. I had blue scenery, blue wig, blue costume. In those days, when you wore a pair of trunks, they had to be three inches from the crotch, and your navel could never be exposed. It was a jewel costume. The wig, the whole scenery was blue. It was a very dramatic dance. I had three girls on each side and a singer -- an operatic singer -- and a man that danced with me -- George Clifford. It was very dramatic.

JS: Would this be called a modern dance today?

MYERS: It would be called oriental. But the word oriental now is so wrongly differently interpreted to from what I know or to from what Ruth St. Denis knows. Oriental dancing now is vulgar. We no more would even use the words "bump" and "grind" to describe it.

JS: Suggestive?

MYERS: Oh, no. No. Will Hayes from Sullivan was czar of the movies, and what he said, went. Around New York Dr. Parkhurst was czar of the theater. When he said your dress was too short you changed it.

By the way, my picture was displayed with a big exhibit on dance at Kennedy Center. 1976 And they were big pictures. I was on top. Mary Pickford's husband -- Buddy Rogers -- the Dunkin Sisters, Annette Kellerman, and my picture were the only four on that column.

And near that column was the code of vaudeville. And I had never known this. If you broke that code and you were told and you did it again, you were out forever. (I did remember, by the way, Sara Bernhardt played the Palace in vaudeville. I saw her there.) But I knew that Nazimova, who was a great Russian actress and very dramatic, was quite daring in those

ERNESTINE MYERS  
Tape 1 -- side 2

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MYERS: days in a dramatic scene. She was told not to do something and she did it, and she was out forever. She never played again.

JS: So, there was really a strict code of ethics?

MYERS: A strict code. Oh, yes. Your dress, your conduct. If you ever were caught with any sort of liquor in your dressing room or on you during the show, that would break any theater contract. Any.

JS: Automatically. It's a little different today, isn't it, Ernestine?

MYERS: I'm getting carried away.

JS: I wanted you to be. While your school was flourishing, vaudeville probably was flourishing for a while, but then it began to change and go down.

MYERS: It changed to the big movie houses, like the Chicago theater, Oriental Theater, and in St. Louis . . . .

JS: Can you give me any recollections that you might have of the local scene regarding vaudeville?

MYERS: Ross Garver was one of the finest men who was ever in show business, and he was the manager of the Keith House here. Keith vaudeville house.

JS: The Keith House was . . . .?

MYERS: Was at the Hippodrome. Then it moved over to the Indiana Theatre.

JS: Where was the Hippodrome?

MYERS: The Hippodrome was on Eighth and Ohio.

JS: What building would that be now? The Scottish Rite?

MYERS: Yes, and then the Keith House moved over to the Indiana Theatre. That [theatre] opened as a vaudeville house, and by the way, we hold the

MYERS: record there. When I was still active in show business and still teaching here, I would take my girls back in vaudeville for the summer; and when we came back, of course, we played three days there. We hold the record for attendance.

JS: Really?

MYERS: I never danced in Terre Haute after I became a professional. I have never been personally paid for dancing in Terre Haute. Only in my own shows which . . . .

JS: Well, then, that time that you stopped here because you were going through . . . .?

MYERS: Oh, no, no, no, I just stopped to see my house. Only time I played in Terre Haute was with Ruth St. Denis, and we got very little money. (Laughs) We got transportation and three meals a day. That was education. We didn't consider that a job.

JS: Do you remember the names of people that used to stop by in Terre Haute in vaudeville?

MYERS: Oh, yes. Everybody played Terre Haute.

JS: Could you tell me anything? Who stopped by?  
[Did] Jack Benny ever come back?

MYERS: Not that I know of. No. Jack Benny was on his way up.

JS: Al Jolson? Did he ever . . . .?

MYERS: No, not that I know of. I do know that I saw Poodles Hanaford at Sixth and Wabash [Streets] one day. Poodles Hanaford was one of the great clowns of big circuses. They had these big white horses. And, of course, I played vaudeville with him. See, those acts would go in vaudeville. As we were coming around the corner, he stopped and said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I live here now." And he said come on out. Somebody in his act was going to be married at the circus. That's when the circus was at Wabash and 25th Street. So we went out there to the wedding. I can't think of the names.

JS: Who was Skeets Gallagher?

MYERS: Now you are getting into orchestras. They used to have these colored people minstrel shows, and concerts would come to the Grand Theatre. Mr. Katzenbaugh was manager. Skeets Gallagher, Skeets Gallagher was a musician? His name is so familiar; yet I might have it in here now and lost it. Among your people who contributed to dancing was certainly Leo Baxter, one of the greats. Leo Baxter was one of the great people of this town.

JS: He was an orchestra leader?

MYERS: Yes. He just begged me to take him as orchestra leader but he was doing well here and I just didn't want to be responsible. And, of course, Bud Cromwell . . . .

JS: Bud Cromwell was an orchestra leader?

MYERS: Oh, yes. They would have big bands. Oh, big bands would come in at the Trianon Dance Hall. Great big bands.

JS: Where was the Trianon?

MYERS: Out east on Wabash.

JS: Across from Wassels, around there somewhere? Or further east?

MYERS: That's all so built up now. When it was Trianon, it wasn't so built up.

JS: Sort of around there though?

MYERS: Yes. Yes, right around there. It burned. But it really . . . . That was the attraction. In those days we had . . . . There was also Tokyo. Tokyo was more in existence when I was gone. When I would come home, it was near the Terre Haute House between Seventh and Eighth on the north side of Wabash.

JS: A dance hall?

MYERS: Yes, but it was a good one. They were safe places to go where nice people went. And then once it was on South Eighth Street in one of those brick

MYERS: buildings (behind Scottish Rite).

[Other people who played in Terre Haute were:] Jack O'Grady, Ida Campbell (Ida Campbell [a pianist and singer] was killed in an auto coming from the Trianon), Lowell Tennis, Warren Henderson, Jimmy Adami, and Johnny "Scat" Davis from Brazil. (He married Ross Garver's daughter.) I told you Garver was manager of the Keith House -- a fine fellow. Izzy Friedman was one of the great musicians and he was identified with Terre Haute, but I don't think he was a Terre Haute person. Claude Thornhill, I think, was more identified with IU [Indiana University] but he was around here. Now, those are the only names. Now, what name did you tell me?

JS: Skeets Gallagher. Skeets Gallagher?

MYERS: He was in vaudeville -- yes, vaudeville.

JS: What about someone by the name of Sis Hopkins?

MYERS: She was an actress from here. Now you are going before my time but I can go back. She was from here and Valeska Suratt.

JS: Yes, what was she?

MYERS: A notorious actress. She had a reputation, but now she's before my time. But those are names I know.

JS: Julia Parker?

MYERS: Julia Parker was my neighbor. Her father was postmaster here. She was in Earl Carroll's Vanities.

JS: And who was Paul Sutherland?

MYERS: Paul Sutherland is not a Terre Haute man. His parents moved here, and he was a very, very fine soloist, premier danseur, with the big ballets. I think the last time I saw him was in Washington. [I] talked to him. He was at Wolftrap with the Harkness Ballet. [It] just happened I had a VIP pass to go up, (Laughs) and [I] met him backstage.



JS: Let's talk for a minute about the theaters that were in Terre Haute during the early years of your school. There must have been quite a few theaters.

MYERS: Well, the theater that I remember was the Grand Theater, and the only time I played there was when the Elks brought me home from New York for one of their Elks Minstrels. It was given at the Grand Theater, and Leo Baxter was conducting the orchestra. I brought a man home with me to dance with me, and we both tried to tell Leo how to play the music. He shook his fist at me because when I was a child I had trouble with music, and mother would pay Leo to play the piano. Leo would make me move to that different time, and he was still the boss with me. We were up on the stage rehearsing for the Elks Minstrel, and he said to me, "One at a time." He shook his fist at me, and he said "Don't you talk to me and you talk to me at the same time." (Laughs) From that day on I admired Leo and respected him. So the only time I played the Grand Theatre it was with St. Denis.

And the Elks Minstrels and the Hippodrome 727 Ohio Street were vaudeville. I never played it as vaudeville. And pardon me for saying this, but I was never booked into the smaller towns. They were always larger cities. I don't know whether I said this before, but if the city liked you or the manager liked you, you could play a return. I would play a return engagement in Washington often -- it was a great city for me -- with the same act.

JS: Was Terre Haute very oriented toward vaudeville?

MYERS: Oh, I would say yes, yes. Now, it could be just because it was my home, I wasn't booked in here. I don't know. It wasn't because the city was too small. If you had any place that would play a week, it would attract name people. The smaller places, it wasn't Keith; it was Pantages vaudeville. I don't know anything about that. Only they played half weeks and three shows a day. The Indiana Theater had big shows -- band shows, mostly, with singers.

JS: Was it considered a sophisticated theatre?

MYERS: Tops, tops in theater. I can see names but names pop off of my mind. We had big bands. Everybody used to go to the theater on Sundays or weekends in Terre Haute or to a good movie or musical movie.

END OF TAPE 1

Tape 2

MYERS: I was staying at the Ansonia Hotel which is 72nd and Broadway. And I would get up maybe 8:30 or 9:00 A.M., and it was spring this time, this particular time. I would walk down Fifth Avenue or Broadway from 72nd Street to 59th, which is Central Park, and down Fifth Avenue to 42nd Street, the Library. Then I would go back to Brenton Hall which was on -- I guess it's the Avenue of the Americas now -- I think it would be Seventh Avenue. And it was a great big building where they had all kinds of dirty rooms, and they would rent them to people rehearsing. There would be your greatest artists there and there would also be animal acts and acrobats.

I remember coming out of there one time. It was a summer evening and people were coming from across Fifth Avenue from the big hotels over to the Broadway theatres. I saw Mr. and Mrs. Jake Finklestein from Terre Haute and, believe it or not, I stepped into the doorway and let them go by. I hid from them because I was so tired I was afraid they would give me a dime for a cup of coffee. I was way up in the money then, and I would walk along till I could hail a cab and go on back. That's the way we worked. Now, of course, we would only be in rehearsal for about two weeks but rehearsals were pretty hard.

JS: You said you wanted to mention something about Oskar Duenweg, Ernestine?

MYERS: In my childhood here -- young teens or maybe 12 or 11 -- Professor Oskar Duenweg had a great ballroom class here [715<sup>th</sup> Wabash Avenue] and he was one of the finest men. You really learned social etiquette from

MYERS: him. We wore little fancy dresses. The boys always had to wear dark blue suits. We had to have black patent leather shoes, and we carried them up in the bag. You stood in line and each boy passed by you and thanked you for a dance and asked you for the dance. By the way, they gave big parties. I remember being a partner and doing the grand march with Tony Hulman and with Wayne Nattkemper. [about 1910] I wish I could think of the fellow who was the doctor. Miss Rose Farrington used to always lead the grand march, and I am sure that Professor Duenweg's classes included all of the adults too.

JS: Now, was he a competitor of Rose Farrington's?

MYERS: No. He owned a leather goods store about Fifth and Ohio, [527 Ohio Street] but he was tall and thin, a perfect gentleman. [He was] an exquisite ballroom dancer. We learned all of the conventional ballroom dances.

JS: He actually taught dancing?

MYERS: Oh, yes, yes. And you were not on the right side of the railroad unless you went to Professor Duenweg's.

JS: But could you go to Miss Farrington's at the same time?

MYERS: Miss Farrington, she taught esthetic dancing in later years, I believe, after Professor Duenweg retired. He was a man when I was a child with graying hair, so he did not continue. Miss Rose Farrington continued to teach, and she did teach some ballroom at the Y.W. [C.A.], I believe.

But when I studied with her, it was mostly esthetic dancing -- skirt dances we did and things like that. But he must not be forgotten as one of the great influences of etiquette for the young people and for courtesy and helping you to grow up to be a better person.

MYERS: Mr. William L Schomer also had ballroom dancing and was quite a tap dancer and teacher himself. I believe in early years he did some theater work. I am not too sure, but he was a very nice man and also did a great deal for Terre Haute young people in tap and ballroom. Chris D. Stark, I believe, I mentioned before.

JS: Was it unusual for men to be dance teachers in those days?

MYERS: . . . . In my day, men were only there to hold you up and support you and make you look good. The first time that I ever found that I was watching a man dance instead of the woman was when I watched Velez of Velez and Yolanda. They were a ballroom team at the Palmer House in Chicago, and I was watching him more than her. But, of course, nowadays men are just as outstanding as women. In my days they were only there to hold you up and support you. Make you look good.

You asked me about people. Edith May Capps was originally a Terre Haute girl, but she was in New York writing for theater. She was friendly with Fred Allen, and we would go -- I'm a Catholic -- and we would go to church together. But Edith May and I had it planned that when we got near the crowd, we would push Fred back of us. We didn't want to be seen with him (Laughs) 'cause he wasn't good looking.

In later years I am sure that would have reversed because he was a very famous person. So you asked me about people that I have associated with. I can't think of anyone else. If you are in a theater, there is always someone who is very well-known.

END OF TAPE 2

ERNESTINE MYERS MORRISSEY

Tape 3

August 16, 1980

Mrs. Morrissey's home -- 3329 Wabash Avenue  
Terre Haute, Indiana

INTERVIEWER: Joyce L. Shanks

TRANSCRIBER: Kathleen M. Skelly -- Martha Hafner

For: Vigo County Oral History Program

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JS: I'm Joyce Shanks and we're sitting in Ernestine Myers Morrissey's home at 3329 Wabash Avenue, talking about her memories of dance and dance schools in Terre Haute, Indiana, and theaters and vaudeville.

Ernestine, I'd like to ask you if you can recall some of the early dance schools in Terre Haute.

MORRISSEY: Well, the first one that I would know would be Rose Farrington, and that was at 5th and Park Streets.

JS: Um hm.

MORRISSEY: And she taught in the parlor -- in those days they had double parlors -- in her home at 920 South 5th Street. And most of the dances she taught were from the Louis H. Chalif Book of Dance. We used to call them fancy dances, skirt dances or gavottes, and things like that. And . . . well, she taught every afternoon. The Farrington family was a very well-known family -- one of the pioneer families of Terre Haute. Do you want me to go on with any more explanation of dance? At that time Professor Oskar Duenweg had ballroom dancing and that was upstairs on the south side of Wabash between 7th and 8th Street 715½ Wabash Avenue. Both teenagers and adults had classes there, and the etiquette was very extreme. And we used to have . . . the boys and the girls had to have black patent-leather pumps. We couldn't wear them on the street; we had to bring them up in a little bag. It was very, very nice.

JS: Was Rose Farrington a competitor of Professor Duenweg?

MORRISSEY: No. Rose Farrington taught mostly girls, and Oskar Duenweg, Professor Oskar Duenweg, was entirely ballroom -- social -- etiquette.

JS: And how old would you have to be to go to Miss Farrington?

MORRISSEY: Oh, I would say five years old.

JS: Oh.

MORRISSEY: After that time.

JS: Whereas Professor Duenweg was more teenagers and adults?

MORRISSEY: Well, I would say young, maybe eight <sup>or</sup> nine-year-old classes. He had classes for all ages from, I would say, seven, eight years old up.

JS: Now, who were some of the other teachers?

MORRISSEY: Well, when I first came home from the stage, there was a Eunice Schraum. She taught out here in Edgewood Grove, and I went to one of her spring recitals, and I was very impressed that it was very nice dancing and well taught. I had quite a bit of . . . I had great respect for her. However, she left Terre Haute. I really don't know whether she continued in dancing or not.

Then there was Elizabeth Pugh -- now these are all people that were teaching when I was on the stage. Elizabeth Pugh, and I really don't know where she had her school. She did not teach very long.

And . . . well, I tell you until I came home and opened a school -- and that was about 1923 . . . could have been 1924 . . . I've got so many years (laughs) piled up I've lost track of them. There were not any other schools.

JS: So you were competing then with Elizabeth Pugh . . .

MORRISSEY: No. They were . . . They had . . . Now . . . I never competed really with any.

JS: You weren't competing.

MORRISSEY: No. There was . . . there was never a competitive feeling in Terre Haute. I think we all had our particular following and type of people that wanted to learn certain types of dancing.

JS: Were you teaching anything different than these other ladies?

MORRISSEY: No. Elizabeth Pugh had studied with Pavley Oukrainsky in Chicago.

JS: How do you spell that?

MORRISSEY: I will give it to you later.

JS: Okay.

MORRISSEY: Just put down a "P" (laughs) and "Q" there.

JS: Okay.

MORRISSEY: I have the spelling down here.

JS: All right.

MORRISSEY: And . . . when I opened my school, I had a tremendous following, because I had been on the stage and had quite a little bit of glamour back of me.

JS: Um hm.

MORRISSEY: Then there was a Reed C. Marlatt that taught tap dancing and ballroom and acrobatics. And then there was Florence Cizek who opened a school and still has a school here. And Nancy Sauer had been a student of mine, and she opened a school here, and she is still teaching here. Then, of course, Archileen Chambers (Mrs. Shubert Sebree) had been a student of mine a short time. And she had been on the stage and had some professional background, and she had a school here for many years -- very successful. And all these women that I have just mentioned taught ballet, acrobatics, and tap. But we never considered them competitive.

JS: I see. You were all just offering a service . . .

MORRISSEY: Yes. I think so. There are only so many hours in the day that you could teach, and when those hours were filled why that's about . . . . We always had a waiting list, and some of my students I kept from families for 18 years. We'd have each child and she'd stay with me . . . come in when she's young, stay with me through school . . .

JS: Ernestine, what do you think the families were looking for when they brought their children to you?

MORRISSEY: Well, when they first came to me, there were many opportunities in theater . . . . Shirley Temple was young in the movies, and people had that in their mind. But in later years I think it turned to a physical development and a way of discipline. I used to brag that we had many doctors' children. They would send them to me for physical development. And, of course, many children I worked with for a correction in their legs. I had really some major problems with children that I worked with privately, which I was always enjoying. I really liked it.

Many went into teaching dancing, very successfully. We have girls, oh, from all over that are teaching now. Like Margaret Ann Adams in Fort Wayne, and . . . many girls.

JS: Um hm. But primarily what you're saying is that the families sort of considered you as a stepping stone for their children in the natural progress their child would make -- in the rearing of their child?

MORRISSEY: Well, I can best tell you that Mrs. Ault -- when her daughter was married, said "You are half of this child's education in growing up and I want you to come to the wedding." And Helen Hartman said to me one day, "You taught me many things -- when you fall down, get up and try it again." And she said that in everybody's life they have problems where they don't literally fall down, but they overcome them by trying again.

And just yesterday -- I'm a volunteer at the hospital -- one of the Brent girls came in, and



MORRISSEY: she turned to the lady with me and said, "This woman has taught me many things outside of dancing." So there was . . . they used to say I was very good with discipline. I was always very polite to my children, and I remember Barbara Miescher saying to me one day -- I said to her, "Barbara, I have one of your children . . . one of your sister's . . ." and the first time I ever heard "okay" -- I had never used slang -- I turned on her and said, "Don't you talk to me that way." And she said, "I was the one," and she said, "I've never used a slang word since." (laughter) But nowadays vocabulary has changed a great deal.

JS: Oh, yes.

Ernestine, can you tell me a little bit about the recitals and what they were like?

MORRISSEY: Well, the first recitals I remember dancing in were for Miss Rose Farrington; we always called her "Miss Rose." We danced at the YWCA /121 North 7th Street/. I remember doing a little Pavlova gavotte . . .

JS: Now would that be the old YWCA that was torn down?

MORRISSEY: On North 7th. Yes.

JS: Okay.

MORRISSEY: We didn't really have recitals in those days. We used to . . . There was a charity bazaar given at the Spencer-Ball home on South 6th Street every spring, and I think St. Stephen's Guild sponsored it. And I remember dancing there.

I remember dancing for the Phoenix Country Club -- or the Phoenix Club which was at 7th -- or 5th and Wabash -- oh, /I mean/ 5th and Walnut. Fifth and Walnut at that time.

JS: And what was the Phoenix Club then? Was it the Jewish Country Club?

MORRISSEY: It was the Jewish Country Club -- before they had the Country Club.

JS:                   Okay.

MORRISSEY:           And these were all charity affairs.

And I do remember -- as I said before -- when I came from New York, I was interested in schools, and I saw Eunice Schraum's recital at the old Hippodrome Theatre at 8th and Ohio. I was impressed with it; but I believe that I was about the first one to start giving Spring shows. And, as far as I can remember, our first shows were given at the old Hippodrome, which was at 8th and Ohio Streets. And then, of course, we moved to the Indiana Theatre. And when I was still dancing in my own shows, we would give them three nights. Then we moved to the Union Building at ISU.

JS:                   Um hm. ISU.

MORRISSEY:           And we stayed there most of the time. When they were remodeling there, we did give a show at the South school and one at the North school.

JS:                   Were the costumes elaborate?

MORRISSEY:           Our first costumes -- everybody had to make them -- and we had no such things as leotards. We would have to make satin trunks and satin panties, as they were called, and, believe it or not, one parent would make the first costume and give every parent and dressmaker details about how to make it. But when they finished costumes, every one was different. The parents wouldn't like this and the parents wouldn't like that, and it was really kind of a mess.

But then ready-made costumes came in, and that was a God-sent blessing. And they were not too expensive. I've often heard people who have come to me and said, "Oh, I hear they are \$50." Our most expensive costume was maybe \$18. But that would be a ballet that we would buy for the "big girls class," and if they were large girls, they would not outgrow the costumes. We would retrim it, and it would last through about three shows. But the expense of giving a show at the Student Union got up to about \$1800 for just the

MORRISSEY: labor. But we always made our expenses with a show.

JS: You charged admission?

MORRISSEY: Oh yes, we charged admission.

JS: Did each parent have to pay for the costume?

MORRISSEY: Oh yes! Each parent paid for their own costumes, but I would order them, and they came from Chicago. A costumer would come through here and show me the sample costumes.

JS: Did they keep the costumes?

MORRISSEY: Oh, the costumes were theirs. And when I say a show went up to around \$1,800, that was just for labor. I bought nothing for the show. That was just for the labor and the rental.

JS: How is it that you could use those costumes over again if the parents kept them?

MORRISSEY: Our girls would be there for the next show. It would be the same girls.

JS: Oh.

MORRISSEY: When you are up to the "big girls" [class] -- if they survived till we got into the Monday six o'clock class (which was the "big girls" class; when I say "survived" [I mean] if they stayed with me that long) -- they would almost stay with me until they were out of high school. And they would be in about three or four shows.

JS: So, it wasn't unusual for some of the girls to start very young with you and, maybe, go on through high school?

MORRISSEY: With me, if they didn't start when they were six or seven years old, it was almost too late. They would come in, and we had classes for intermediate people which were just . . . but you

MORRISSEY: cannot take a body and make a real good dancer or train a body unless you get it young, because the mind and the body and the brain all have to be trained at the same time.

JS: And do you think that that policy was rather typical of the other schools too? They liked to get the girls young?

MORRISSEY: That I really can't answer. And this is going to surprise many people; I never went -- or very, very seldom went -- to any other dance recital.

JS: Uh huh. There wasn't much communication between the other dance teachers?

MORRISSEY: Miss Sauer and I had quite a bit of communication. If there was anything in the city that we wanted to control, we would talk to each other. Because we both had enough students that we could control what we wanted to.

But I had a different following, and I didn't want to go into the other person's business by seeing their shows. I felt that I might be accused of borrowing something or taking some of their ideas; so I stayed completely away.

JS: Did the other teachers stay pretty much to themselves too?

MORRISSEY: No, they would always come to my shows; and if they wanted advice -- I always felt like the mother of the thing -- they would always come to me for advice.

JS: Uh huh. Sort of like you had seniority in a sense?

MORRISSEY: Yes. (laughter) Oh, yes.

JS: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit, Ernestine, about what you charged in those days?

MORRISSEY: My first price was \$1.00 a lesson.

JS: This would have been back in the mid-1920's?

MORRISSEY: Yes. A private lesson was \$2.50 for a half-hour, and then we changed to . . . . The most I ever charged for a class was \$2.50 and \$3.50 for a private lesson for a half-hour. But in the last many years, it was pay whether you were there or not -- that you reserved the time. And my people were very nice about it. The only time that they were not required to pay was when we had a snow storm, or I had a bad cold; but I always made enough money to have a few of the small luxuries of life and was perfectly satisfied with it.

JS: I remember you did mention that even during the Depression your business did not decline?

MORRISSEY: No, we held right straight through. There was a time, as I told you before, that we closed. I went to Florida, but then I came back, and I opened my school.

JS: But parents evidently felt it was important enough to keep the norm going and keep their children taking lessons?

MORRISSEY: The Depression didn't bother me as much as moving away from Wabash Avenue. When I opened the school, every business thought they had to be on Wabash Avenue; and when I moved down to 318 South 5th Street, I was off of Wabash, and that really frightened me. Then we had a streetcar strike, and I felt "this is it!" But we did not feel it at all. People were used to driving their cars and coming, so. Nowadays you go way out to shop -- way out in the country (laughter) to shopping centers.

JS: When you first started, people must have arrived -- maybe by horses? Did they ever come by horses?

MORRISSEY: No, no, no, I don't remember that at all. We had streetcar service on Wabash Avenue. We had streetcar service on South 3rd, South 7th, Wabash Avenue and . . . . I have always had a following from all these smaller towns. I say "always" -- until the last, maybe, ten years when my students have opened schools in Brazil, Paris, and Sullivan. But we had interurban cars to these different cities, and the girls would come in.

JS:                So your students were coming by interurban, by streetcar, by private car, by bicycle, maybe, and walking?

MORRISSEY:        Yes.

JS:                So that the biggest factor in . . . that might have affected your business was that you moved off of Wabash Avenue, and that didn't affect it really at all?

MORRISSEY:        Well, from Wabash I moved over to . . . by Indiana State. Is that Cherry ~~/Mulberry/~~ Street they closed?

JS:                Uh huh. Oh, yes.

MORRISSEY:        I was there for a couple of years.

JS:                That was in the old church, wasn't it?

MORRISSEY:        Yes, that was in the old church. But you see, I was still in a busy section of town. It was Normal School ~~/rather than Indiana State University/~~ at that time. And then when I moved down on 5th Street, that really frightened me. But one thing that prompted me to do that ~~/was that/~~ when I first came home, there was a Madam Theo Hughes that had a school in Indianapolis. She was really an excellent teacher and more the type person I wanted to be. And she taught in an old home, and that was one of the things I had always had the desire to do when I moved down on 5th Street.

JS:                Can you tell me a little bit about the music?

MORRISSEY:        That is interesting. Yes, we always had our own pianist. In fact, if anyone spoke to me about some other dancing teacher, I would always say, "Has she her own pianist?" Because if you didn't, you sort of lost respect for them. But then the time came when salaries went up and records came in. I thought I would never use a record; but I finally did.

                  We always used commercial records. Now your costume people put out what we call "dance aid records." They are little small 44's. I

MORRISSEY: never used them, because I like full orchestras. We used a great deal of Boston Pops; they're fine orchestrations. But when we first started to do that, we used the old-fashioned . . . they had a little needle that you put in. I would stand there and put the needles in and run the record.

JS: Kind of like a Victrola?

MORRISSEY: Yes. And then, of course, we went to taping our own shows. That was one of the expensive things about giving our show, because I would stay down in the basement of the Indiana Theatre with Frank Caldwell, and we would tape the show one full day. And it turned out very successful.

JS: In the very beginning did you have a pianist?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes. I had a pianist. In fact, even when I was on the stage, I carried my own musical director. Then when we went into the theatres, at first, for the pianist, we would always have Leo Baxter for our spring recital. He was the man in theatre here, and he would stay with us for three days our three shows. We would rehearse and give the show. And I have the greatest respect in the world for Leo Baxter. In fact, when I was a child, music was a little hard for me; and mother used to pay Leo to come and rehearse with me. And Leo would play different tempos and holler at me, "Walk this way or count this way." So from then on, I always respected Leo.

JS: Would that have been a full-time position to play the piano for a dance school?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes.

JS: And was it one that either men or women could fill?

MORRISSEY: I would think so. Believe it or not, one of my first musicians is still very friendly with me, Dorothy May. She's retired and lives at Kill Devil Hill, North Carolina. Dorothy Stuckwisch came to me . . . . Oh, I can't tell you the different people -- they're still friendly with me.

JS: Is there anything else that you want to tell me about the school?

MORRISSEY: Well, there's really . . . oh, you asked me about Indiana State and how I worked with them.

JS: Yes.

MORRISSEY: Do you want me to talk about that?

JS: Yes, that's fine.

MORRISSEY: Well, when they opened the Student Union Building, they opened the theatre in the Student Union Building. Mrs. Hazel Anderson Loewenstein -- and I'm sorry to say I can't think of her maiden name -- but she was in charge of the physical ed. department at that time. Their opening program was A Mid-Summer Night's Dream. And, of course, they did not have enough girls for the ballet. She came down to me and used all of my big girls.

JS: This would have been about when, Ernestine?

MORRISSEY: Oh, I really can't tell you.

JS: The 1930's?

MORRISSEY: Yes, because I was on South 5th Street at the time. I hadn't moved away from there.

Due to the fact that my children were ballet-trained and used to wearing tights . . . . You asked about costumes. We didn't have nylon hose; we had silk tights. And, believe it or not -- this might be interesting to you -- silk tights didn't stretch like nylon hose. And everybody wore a penny in back of their hips with a heavy tape on it. After you got your tights on, you would pull that tape real tight to pull your tights up, and then you sat down with your legs straight. You did not bend them because your knees would bag. Then when you went out, of course, you danced a few minutes, and the tights would stay fairly good-looking.

JS: Did you say a penny?



MORRISSEY: Penny. [A] penny!

JS: Why is that?

MORRISSEY: Well, a little bit of superstition, but you could tie your tape around that penny. It would make a little place for you to tie your tape. And then you would pull the tape around your waist and keep pulling it real tight so you would pull the tights up (you didn't have any garters on). (laughter)

JS: I see. Okay.

MORRISSEY: Well, that's about the first tights I ever wore . . . . Oh, and my girls were used to wearing tights, and Mrs. Loewenstein did not want tights. And my girls were not used to running around with bare legs and . . . . They didn't get along too well to start with, so I had to step in and . . . so that was my only work with Indiana State.

JS: Okay. Eventually, though, you did get involved?

MORRISSEY: No, not with Indiana State . . . only in A Mid-Summer Night's Dream.

JS: Oh, only in that?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

JS: But you mentioned some . . . . In the last tape you mentioned some, some current people who . . .

MORRISSEY: Oh, well, Martha Ann Bush Markle grew up with me.

JS: Did you get involved with the cheerleaders?

MORRISSEY: Oh, they made me recently . . . since I've retired -- no, it was before I retired when I was still on 5th Street -- they made me an honorary Sparkette.

JS: And why was that? Had you helped with the Sparkettes or anything?

MORRISSEY: Due to the fact that I had been . . . raised many of these children who are Sparkettes . . .

JS: Oh . . . So you haven't been involved with them recently?

MORRISSEY: No. No. No.

JS: That was your only involvement?

MORRISSEY: Right. But it was a thrilling afternoon. They took me out on the football field at the Homecoming and . . . . It was an exciting afternoon.

JS: Okay. Okay.

MORRISSEY: Now, I was involved with Saint Mary's /St. Mary of the Woods College/ on their 110th Anniversary. Sister Mary Olive wrote The History of the School, The Growth of a Girl, and The Investiture of a Sister. And I worked over there a year with them.

JS: What did you do for them?

MORRISSEY: I staged and choreographed the performance.

JS: Okay. And when would that have been?

MORRISSEY: The 110th Anniversary . . . 110 years back. It was around 1950. It was right after I became a widow. My husband passed away.

JS: Oh, okay. Okay. Generally speaking, could you comment on the changes that you have seen in dance?

MORRISSEY: That is tremendous! That is tremendous! One of the first ballets, surprisingly one of the first American ballets, was the Christiansons. They are coming to Terre Haute this Fall at ISU /Indiana State University/. And in speaking to someone the other day, they called and asked if I would like to go. And I said, "Yes. I think they date back about four generations." And I have seen their ballet before. And then there are the Littlefields, Dorothy and Catherine Littlefield. (Are we taping this?)

JS: Yes.

MORRISSEY: And they were from Philadelphia. And when I played Philadelphia, everybody was saying, "Go over to Wannamaker's and see their Christmas pageant." It was put on by the Littlefields. Then they branched out and are having their own ballet. They even did the choreography for the Sonja Heine Ice Show. One of the girls -- I don't know whether it was Dorothy or Catherine -- died in Chicago right after putting on the ice show, at a very young age.

Now, that was the first American ballet, but I saw Anna Pavlova and Mordkin here in about 1909, as I remember.

JS: Anna Pavlova and who else?

MORRISSEY: Mikhail Mordkin was with her at this time. Oh, then your great ballets were . . . Well, she came here with the Diaghile Ballet in 1909; then there was a Pavley-Oukrainsky Ballet, and they were in charge of the Chicago Civic Opera Ballet. And the Metropolitan Ballet, that was in New York of course. Then they got into the Robert Joffrey Ballet, and of course, Paul Sutherland was one of their soloists.

JS: Yes. What I would like for you to talk about, Ernestine, is how is ballet, or dance -- the kinds of things that you taught -- different now than it was when you first started teaching?

MORRISSEY: Well, it's much more complicated. You have to really excel. You really have to excel. And, even though and surprisingly, some people don't realize that -- who is the little skinny guy -- that most of these men, Fred Astaire and people like that, have had ballet training. And even Gene Kelly had a dancing school. Then, when it started to change, Balanchine brought more modern dance into ballet. He is New York City Ballet.

Now I'm skipping way down here to . . . Oh, well the Winnipeg Ballet was over at St. Mary's when it was a very small company. And, at the time, I said, "It's going to be a big company,"

Tape 3

MORRISSEY: and it really is. The Canadian companies are tremendous; but they all have had more modern choreographers . . . . Oh dear, I can't think of some of these people. By the way, did you see Joel Gray with the Boston Pops?

JS: No.

MORRISSEY: Oh my, my, my! My! My! Absolutely magnificent! Well, such people as Elliott Field and Martha Graham, who are great modern choreographers, and even they will do choreography now for your New York City Ballet.

Now, your American Ballet Theatre stays more to the classical ballets, but your New York City Ballet with Balanchine changes.

JS: Is there anything in the modern dance world that "turns you off"?

MORRISSEY: Well, I can't stand quite a bit of words that we would never use. As I've often said, I would rather swear than use some of the words in the things they do now in dancing. I don't like vulgar things. I don't think it's necessary.

JS: Suggestive things?

MORRISSEY: Yes. And, of course, they do not have any dress codes now, and some of the scant dressing bothers me. At one time I was called "the most undressed woman in musical comedy"; but, believe me, we did not dare show a navel, and our trunks had to be three inches from our crotch. And now all you do is wear, pardon me, a G-string. And that bothers me. I don't mind if they want to be nude, as long as they don't move around. A woman's body is pretty. But even Martha Graham, on the last thing I saw her on TV . . . and I was amazed that she would be so vulgar. But I think they do it to keep abreast of the times. . . . I did not see Bob Fosse in All That Jazz, because . . . I was all ready to go but was told it was offensive. I have walked out of some pictures. And, believe me, I'm not a prude; and I do not have false modesty; but some of it is so "far out."

JS:                   What about the men dancing? It seems to me that you welcome that?

MORRISSEY:           When I danced (and I read this just recently while I was preparing for this) . . . Najinsky was one of the first to assist a woman and become important. Before that most of them just were there to make the lady look better. And when I danced, I carried one or two men all the time just to lift me and just so I had someone to dance to. We looked down on them. But the first time I really found myself watching the man more than the woman, was Valez and Yolanda at the Palmer House. But men now are absolutely marvelous. They are absolutely marvelous. They are the great choreographers: Murray Lewis, Alvin Ailey, (are) wonderful. The first time I saw a colored man (the New York City Ballet carried him) I more-or-less resented it. But I tell you, some of these black people -- I think they prefer to be called -- are wonderful! The brains are excellent! Peter Janero changed a lot and had great influence on dancing.

JS:                   Do you remember, Ernestine, were there any dance halls in Terre Haute when you first came here?

MORRISSEY:           See, I was gone from the time I was 16 until I was 23 or 24. I would come home occasionally, you know, for holidays, and I do remember a Tokyo. Leo Baxter used to play there. There were many, many, famous or well-known orchestras and bands which I have a list here of them, and I would go to them, and they were nice. They were nice! And . . . not that I am opposed to the young people today; but if we had dance halls today, I don't think they would be conducted as nice as those we used to have.

JS:                   There was a place called "The Summer Garden." Do you know that?

MORRISSEY:           Yes. It was out east, I believe. There was a place up at Clinton.

JS:                   Up at North Terre Haute. There was more open-air dancing in those days?

MORRISSEY: Your bands are great bands. They are not great but well-known around Terre Haute and very well respected. Of course, the Trianon used to bring in big bands, and we'd wear evening clothes, long dresses and dress up to go.

JS: So, in those days, people were actually going out to dance for the evening? It's not that they were going to a club-sponsored dance; they were going to a dance hall?

MORRISSEY: No. They were going to a dance hall, but a dance hall was a respected place in those days. And I can truthfully say I never saw too much drinking. Of course, we didn't know what marijuana was in those days, and they /dance halls/ were very respected.

JS: Uh huh. How much would it cost to go to a dance hall?

MORRISSEY: (Laughter) I never bought my own ticket, so I can't really say.

JS: But they /dance halls/ were very popular?

MORRISSEY: Very popular! Very popular!

JS: What kind of dances were done in those dance halls?

MORRISSEY: Oh, foxtrot, one-step, waltz, close dancing, close dancing.

JS: What they call "touch dancing" now?

MORRISSEY: I suppose it would be. Tangos, and in later years, it became the rhumba and the cha-cha; but none of this wild stuff -- just looking at you jumping around. Now, that's one thing I can't tolerate.

JS: No doing your own thing?

MORRISSEY: No! No!

JS: There was a set pattern?

MORRISSEY: I spoke of Professor Duenweg. And in our schools and in your better hotels in cities, you had Arthur Murray, which was respected at that time. So, Arthur Murray Schools have changed a little bit now like all times have changed, and you have to go along with them. I'm glad I taught when I did, because I don't think I would have survived all this.

JS: Did you ever teach ballroom dancing?

MORRISSEY: I taught private ballroom lessons. Mrs. Dr. Combs started it. She said that she didn't want her children to grow up and just know the children who went to school with them. So she picked 10 boys and 10 girls from all over town, and we would give them a ballroom lesson and it was strict ballroom etiquette. And we would give a very pretty little party afterwards where they had to come with their little fancy dresses on, and we served them punch. The colored man who used to work for me always wore a white coat, and we served it very fancy and very nice. We had a grand march, and I did that for quite some time.

JS: Ernestine, what kind of a philosophy did you try and give to your students regarding the possibility of their success in dance or theatre?

MORRISSEY: Well, when I first came here and opened school, there were a lot of possibilities due to the fact there weren't a lot of children in theatre. But in theatre there was a Garry Society which controlled the children's education and how they were handled. But in later years theatre had changed so much. Movies had become so important and television that theatre . . . . Just like for an example Indianapolis always had a big time vaudeville house which played two shows a day. And they had small-time which played three shows a day. Big acts did not play there. They always had a musical show, and they always had a heavy drama. I have played Indianapolis in shows myself.

Then, of course, when television took over and theatre changed so much, I would discourage my children from thinking about a professional

MORRISSEY: career. Just like I will discourage them in becoming a model. So many of them want to become models now. And, if you are successful, it is great; but hundreds and hundreds do not make it. And I would encourage them to go into physical education, which I think is wonderful. And it is just like Margaret Doyle who grew up with me. She is now the head of the dance department in Massachusetts (I don't know what university). But she is able to enjoy putting on the shows or the pageants there, and still she is a respected teacher of physical education. Only one in hundreds can make it now, and it's pretty hard.

JS: You mentioned theatres here in Terre Haute. I read somewhere that Terre Haute was really a very popular theatre town.

MORRISSEY: It was. The only time I ever played it was with St. Denis. The only time I ever played Terre Haute professionally was with St. Denis, and that was Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. We played the Grand Theatre. That was the old Grand at 7th and Cherry, back of the old Terre Haute House. But theatre really started in Terre Haute with Young's Garden Aerodome. His name was Sam Young, and it was at 4th and Ohio. Now, I was a child at the time, but I was taking dancing lessons with Rose Farrington, and I never saw the Aerodome. But some little girls I went to school with used to be in amateur shows there. They had amateur shows and they also had a stock company.

Then there was a Theodore Barhydt. And we had the Grand Theatre, and the greatest of your shows would come there -- minstrel shows in those days and your great actresses.

I don't know that Sarah Bernhardt ever played here, but she might have; and there were great people who would play there. And they would stay three or four days or maybe a week, because, oh, people would dress and go to the theatre at night and wear evening gowns.

Theodore Barhydt was president of the Grand Theatre, and he was one of the promoters that built the Indiana Theatre here.



JS: It sounds as though the local audiences were pretty appreciative?

MORRISSEY: Oh, Terre Haute is a great town! Great town for theatre--oh dear, I can't even think of her name--but then the Hippodrome opened in vaudeville. And that was a full week at two shows a day. Shannon Katzenbaugh was manager of the Grand; then Ross Garver and Pat Healey were with the vaudeville houses here as managers. And, believe it or not, the managers can send a report in to the booking office and request you not to come back anymore, or they can request you to play again. They are very important. Like Washington, D.C. was a great city for me, and Kansas City was great; and you play them twice a year. Other than that, you just went into a town once a year.

JS: I see.

MORRISSEY: But Terre Haute . . . Blossom Sealey was married in Terre Haute. I can't think who she married, but she was married here. And you know that Marie Dressler was from Terre Haute.

JS: Yes. And she was a vaudevillian?

MORRISSEY: No, those people played theatre. People who played vaudeville could also play in musical shows -- revue-type shows. Just like I refer to myself because many people did that. They would go into vaudeville for a year, and they would get a show which would play here, or later on you could play concerts, too.

JS: What kind of an attitude did people have toward theatre people in those days?

MORRISSEY: In the early years, of course, I started with St. Denis, and she was considered an artist; and we were entertained by the very best people. I can think of playing in Chicago, and we were invited to the Blackstone Club. They /theatre people/ were considered artists, and the very best of people entertained you.

MORRISSEY: There was a time . . . . When I first started, of course, young girls my age did not work, and my friends kinda looked down on me. But by the time when I was at Winnipeg, I had pneumonia in Minneapolis. I refer to myself so much (pardon me for doing it), but it's the only way I can explain these things. I played Winnipeg after having pneumonia and met some people socially; and I was entertained all the way through the western part of Canada by lords and ladies.

In vaudeville, or theatre -- in those days -- people had their seats by the year, they would reserve their seats; and, oh, you would be sort of a social favorite in the town. And I think that's true of Terre Haute.

JS: Do you think there were many affluent people who could nicely afford the theatre.

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Theatre was very well respected in later years.

JS: What do you think a season ticket would have cost about in the 1920's?

MORRISSEY: Well, I was just looking through a magazine -- and it was a 1921 magazine -- the other day at the library. The Palace Theatre in New York was the queen of all vaudeville houses. The booking offices just above are in that same building; and the tickets were \$1.50 for a matinee. They started at 50¢ for the gallery and went to \$2.00 for the night show.

JS: So, it was probably maybe even a little cheaper here in Terre Haute at that time?

MORRISSEY: I would have no idea. I can say that we charged \$1.00 for our tickets -- for our first shows -- and then we went to \$2.00.

JS: Do you remember ever seeing an audience be angry with the actors or with the vaudeville?

MORRISSEY: No. No. No. I have never been in a theatre where that really happened. Either here . . . however, I did play the Colonial Theatre in New

MORRISSEY: York, and the usher came back. He was called "Jimmy the Gallery Boy." And he asked my partner, Carl Randall, how much it would cost to "give us a big hand" or "put you over" as they say; and Carl had never been approached by anything like that. He said, "Just leave us alone." But he said during our performance he Jimmy had the gallery clap in a "march" and just marched us right off that stage by clapping so hard that we had to quit. Anyway, we exposed the gallery boy, but he would approach all the acts and say, "Just pay me and I'll keep the gallery quiet." That's the only experience I've ever had.

END OF SIDE ONE

TAPE THREE-SIDE TWO

JS: Ernestine, you wanted to mention the names of some famous vaudevillians who were from Terre Haute.

MORRISSEY: Well, Alice Fisher was a dramatic actress, and I don't know whether she was ever in vaudeville, but she was a very prominent person in theatre. And the Wilton sisters, Rose and May Wilton, were from Terre Haute. And they were like the Duncan sisters. They were very prosperous for a while in New York. I think we mentioned Rose Melville, who was Sis Hopkins, and Marie Dressler.

People were more polite. We didn't know what these demonstrations were. I don't want to say we were more cultured, because we certainly have improved in culture and education, but I never saw any rudeness around dance halls. I never saw any rudeness around theatre. In fact, we used to come out of the stage door at 11:00 or 11:30 at night, and I remember wearing all the jewelry I had -- which was quite a bit -- and I wasn't afraid. Now, I don't wear any. So it was a different world.

JS: Maybe you're saying that people were more appreciative of theatre people in those days? More respectful?

MORRISSEY: Yes, but the theatre people didn't demand it. The things that they were doing did not create the environment that we have now. Some of the environment that we have now, I am sorry to say, goes back to movies and theatre. There is nothing much left to do in movies; it's a little vulgar, so that creates a controversial audience.

JS: When you had your dance school and theatre people were playing Terre Haute, did you ever have any contact with them?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes! Yes! Some of the nicest contacts! The old vaudevillians would, well . . . mostly vaudeville because it changed every week they didn't have much to do, and they would . . . I was still active enough in theatre that they remembered me. In fact, I was going around the corner at 6th and Wabash and met Poodles Hannafor, who was here with the circus. Somebody was going to be married and he invited me out to the circus to see the wedding. And, yes, they would come over and spend time with me.

JS: Did they like Terre Haute?

MORRISSEY: Yes, Terre Haute was a good city to play. It was a good city! The criticism that I have ever heard about Terre Haute was only that we had racketeers. We had a "red light district." I remember the man I worked for was going to Kansas City, and, of course, in those days we traveled by train. He got off the train and walked around a little bit. And when he came back, he said, "I didn't know you came from such a (I don't know what word he used), but I cried, because I was ashamed of the town from what he said. But theatre was good here and Terre Haute has always been a good city to me. I think that if they knew other cities, they would have the same problems.

JS: Do you know where the vaudevillians and the theatre people stayed when they came here?

MORRISSEY: Well, yes. By the Goodie Shop /cafeteria -- where it is now located/ there was a hotel.

JS: Oh. What was the name of it?

MORRISSEY: Now, you've got me. The Croxton House.

JS: Croxton?

MORRISSEY: Something like that. And it was on the northeast corner of 7th and Ohio. It has since been destroyed, and it was not so much like a hotel. I presume that it might have been a big apartment house. The actors would stay (there). And, in those days, a lot of times there would be boarding houses.

I can best explain it . . . and I was playing Baltimore, and it was Thanksgiving time, and I was living at the hotel. Julia Saunderson, who was a very big artist in the theatre, came to me and asked me if I would like to go to the boarding house for Thanksgiving dinner. And I said, "Oh, no!" And looked down my nose. But the closer Thanksgiving came the more lonesome I got, and I asked to go with them. I found that Howard's boarding house in Baltimore was absolutely magnificent! Most of the acts would take a room there (she rented the rooms to actors only), and she served them delicious food. Now, I think the Croxton House here was something like that. And the hotel was right next to the Goodie . . . . The building is still there -- the Goodie Shop.

JS: Which side of the Goodie Shop?

MORRISSEY: The entrance would be a little bit east of the Goodie Shop. If you look up above, it's a yellow brick building, and it was a hotel. This was the Hotel Tuller at 670-1/2 Ohio. Mrs. Morrissey has confused it with the Croxton House at 714 Ohio which did house theatre people. I was never in it.

Of course, we had the Filbeck House.

JS: And people stayed there too?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes. May I say this? In my time we could go into the best hotel in the city and say we were from the theatre, and we want professional rates. And we could get the best room in the hotel for \$5.00. That's unbelievable nowadays.

JS: Yes. Yes, it is! (laughter) You probably had the same privileges as salesmen do now?

MORRISSEY: Yes, I would think so.

JS: If you were a theatre person now, you might be charged more?

MORRISSEY: I would think I would be charged more. I would be expected to take a suite -- or a floor. (laughter)

JS: What do you remember, Ernestine, about some of the old vaudeville shows?

MORRISSEY: The people or the shows?

JS: Either or both.

MORRISSEY: Well, there was always . . . in some cities there were five acts, and usually the big acts -- the important ones -- would never open the show.

JS: Was that true here in Terre Haute?

MORRISSEY: Oh, that's true any place. That was sort of the unspoken rule of the theatre. And there could be an animal act or an acrobatic act. There would always be either a comedian, who would work in what we call "one" or by himself; or there would be a small miniature musical comedy show which would have the juvenile, the ingenue, and the chorus girls. That would run about 45 minutes. Or, like in my time, I would do a small miniature ballet instead of the musical show. And then there would be a dramatic act which would run about 35 ~~to~~ 40 minutes, and there would be very good artists.

There would be five or seven acts in the big cities; sometimes there would be seven acts. But the important people never wanted to open or close the show. They always came on third, fourth, or fifth. Oh, take like Jack Benny and Bob Hope and your great performers would be in vaudeville. And I would think the salaries for a single man in vaudeville . . . I know that Lou Holtz was getting \$5,000 a week for just walking on and talking.

JS: That would have been back in the 'twenties? 'Thirties?

MORRISSEY: Yes, because I was home in '32.

JS: And, do you think that the audiences for vaudeville were the same audiences as theatre audiences?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes; oh, yes. But some cities like . . . well, not some cities /all cities/ . . . . It was a different thing. In those days, they didn't have much home entertainment such as we have now -- radios, television, recordings going all day long. They would go to vaudeville. As I said, most of the people had their season tickets. I would say that half of the main floor would be season tickets; and they would go to the dramatic theatre or musical show. They were always crowded, always crowded.

JS: Was there any food available at either the theatre or vaudeville?

MORRISSEY: No, I never saw any food! They would come in at 8:15, and 2:15 for the matinee, and they would sit down. There was none of this walking around, or continuous -- it happened after I left -- continuous theatre. But no. In fact, you wouldn't be seen eating on the street or in your car in those days. Those were different kinds of people.

JS: And people were well dressed?

MORRISSEY: Very well dressed. Very well dressed.

JS: Did children ever go to the theatre or vaudeville?

MORRISSEY: Yes! Yes. Oh, yes!

JS: Maybe even families?

MORRISSEY: Yes. Yes. It was a social activity for people. And I met some very, very nice people. People would . . . oh, send you notes. And I remember in Akron, Ohio, I think it was, a lady asked me to go to lunch at the Country Club. And, of course, you refused the first couple of times, because you wanted to make sure, and we became friends.

MORRISSEY: In Kansas City, I became friends with a lady who sent me a note.

JS: So, the audience had a little more contact with the theatre people than they do now?

MORRISSEY: Yes, because they treated you nicer. Now they mob these people. And these people have become idols. I think it's mostly because theatre was alive and was closer. Now these celebrities are on television and in movies, and they are too far away. So, when they do see them, they lose their heads then and mob them.

JS: Ernestine, we're winding up now about some of your impressions, and I would like to ask you -- what was Terre Haute like in the 1920's when you returned from your theatre tour?

MORRISSEY: Well, you must realize when I came home I had been seven years in all the big cities from coast-to-coast and Canada. But I never looked at Terre Haute as being a small, pardon the expression, "hick" town.

JS: I wonder why that was? What did it have that redeemed it?

MORRISSEY: Well, it had theatre, which I was interested in. It had a college here. It had industry. In fact, Terre Haute, for the years -- the competitive years with other cities -- was the same as other cities of its size. I think in the latter years, it has deteriorated more due to the change in shopping.

Pardon me for saying it, but I think the merchants have allowed Wabash Avenue to deteriorate. I saw State Street in Chicago the other day. And when I had seen it several years ago, it was real dirty and deteriorated. And it is amazing . . . of course, I realize that is Chicago. But Terre Haute had a certain amount of culture here; it had good symphonies; it had good education; it had good theatre. It's always had an interesting kind of government, sometimes notorious, but interesting.

I never felt that I wanted to live in a big city. And we are surrounded by small cities that



MORRISSEY: feed into Terre Haute. So, I think the commercial value in Terre Haute . . . you can get about anything you want. In fact, I looked at coats in Marshall Field's the other day and decided I'm going to buy a coat. Years ago, when I really wanted a very elaborate coat or a good fur coat, I went to Chicago and Indianapolis. And I came back and bought it at Jame-Wolf's -- a Persian lamb coat. I've always found anything in Terre Haute. Most anything [you want] you can get.

I do have this criticism: that people don't cooperate with the other person, either in business or [the arts] -- not only in dancing. It doesn't exist in dancing as much as it does in other things, like your symphony. I offered to do a number with them, at their choice, and they didn't even answer the letter. I offered to donate the proceeds of our Spring show to Indiana State, providing that they would give the money to an art scholarship, and they wouldn't accept it. So, people are very much on their own here. I do have that suggestion, and I think it still exists.

JS: A feeling of independence. An independent operation, and yet you're all working toward the same goal.

MORRISSEY: The same thing. But they do not cooperate. And I think it exists a little bit now. But, of course, nowadays you have so many chain organizations in Terre Haute that very few businesses are owned by Terre Haute people. And, you know, when I came home, everything was "home-owned."

JS: "Home-owned." "Family-owned" probably. And there were certain families that were well known in the community?

MORRISSEY: Very much so. I played with Alice Failey, the Fairbanks, and, of course, the Hulmans, the Palmers, the Coles, and John Lamb's family. (John Lamb was a great man in Terre Haute.) The Blacks (Miriam Black's parents). I don't want to name people, because I know I'm going to leave some out, and that's wrong. We did have a St. Anthony's Hospital. That was run by the Sisters [Poor Sisters of St. Francis Seraph of Perpetual Adoration] and was excellent.

JS: Where did people who lived in Terre Haute make their money? What kinds of businesses . . . ?

MORRISSEY: Well, when I was in Washington recently, a friend of mine asked me how many millionaires we had in Terre Haute. And I said, "Well, surely we have wealthy people, because somebody has to support the town and these plants and things we have." And I once heard that Terre Haute, for its size, has more expensive cars. I was going to say Cadillacs because I drive one. (laughter) I take that back. But for its size, we have very wealthy people here. I don't want to name them, but I can tell you that there are quite a few of them.

JS: Could you mention the names of the ones back in the 'twenties when you first came back?

MORRISSEY: Well, of course, I grew up with Tony Hulman; I grew up with Bill Root, the Root's boys. We went to dancing school together. There were the Pattons and George Oscar Dix, lawyers. John Lamb was younger than I a little bit. Gee, I can't think of the names.

JS: And these people were all professional people?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes. George Oscar Dix was a lawyer, and Wayne Nattkemper were all wealthy people. Ruel ~~/Fox/~~ Burns was worth a million dollars. They grew up here with Weston Paper, and they are still affiliated with it. Salo Levit, I'm sure, is a very wealthy man. He was the founder of Meis store. They have stores in Danville and around.

JS: Blumbergs?

MORRISSEY: Blumbergs. Blumbergs . . . . They were right next to me when I moved on 5th Street. That is the old Blumberg home. ~~/They were/~~ enormously wealthy people and still are. So, Terre Haute has had its share of wealth.

JS: There is a combination of professional and industry?

ERNESTINE MYERS MORRISSEY  
Tape 3-Side 2

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MORRISSEY: Oh, I'm sure. Yes.

JS: Thank you, Ernestine.

MORRISSEY: Well, it's been a pleasure.

END OF TAPE

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